West Coast Story

By George Nicholson

TALE of TRAGEDY

IN THE DAYS OF SAIL, and for steamers also before the advent of radio directors, radar and other modern aids to navigation, the West Coast of Vancouver Island was a death trap for the weather blinded. Wherever sailormen gathered in the crowded fo'c'sles, they spoke in unholy words of the "graveyard of the Pacific," referring to these rocky shores.

Masters of sailing vessels especially feared this area, and always breathed more easily once their ships were inside Juan de Fuca Strait. The prevailing currents are to the north, and a sailing vessel in the throes of a fresh southeasterly, if she missed Cape Flattery, was always in jeopardy of being carried ashore somewhere on Vancouver Island.

The list of major shipwrecks which occurred in this area, most of them during the last two decades of the 19th century, is factually incomplete, but the number is staggering. The names of vessels which came to grief in the immediate vicinity of Barkley Sound, where the majority of the wrecks occurred, their fate, together with a brief account of what happened, as told by survivors, or people who assisted in their rescue, form the subject of this article.

During Christmas night, 1905, the steel, four-masted British ship Pass of Melfort, 2,200 tons, Captain Harry Scougall, from Panama to Port Townsend, was driven ashore in a heavy southwest gale, a short distance eastward of Amphitrite Point, at the western entrance to Barkley Sound. All hands perished.

On December 31, 1860, the Peruvian brigantine Florencia, 200 tons, Captain J. P. de Echiandeia, bound from Puget Sound to Callao with a cargo of lumber and three passengers, was wrecked about five miles west of Amphitrite Point. She sailed on Nov. 8, and on Nov. 12, when off Cape Flattery, ran into dirty weather and was thrown on her beam ends, her captain, supercargo, cook, and one of her passengers, Dr. T. B. Baillie of Victoria, being drowned.

After awhile she righted herself, completely waterlogged and with her deck cargo gone. In this condition, she sailed and drifted into Nootka Sound. There she anchored and on being pumped out was found to be perfectly tight.

News of her plight was brought to Victoria by Captain Charles E. Barrett-Lennard (Lennard Island and lighthouse, Clayoquot Sound) of Victoria, who, in the Templar, a cutter-yacht of 20 tons which he had recently brought out from England on the deck of the ship Athelstan, was making a tour around Vancouver Island. Templar Channel, Clayoquot Sound, and Templar Island, off Foul Bay, Victoria, were both named after the cutter.

HM gunboat Forward was immediately despatched to render the Florencia assistance, but hearing on arrival at Nootka that the American brig Consort, with a number of passengers, had been lost the month previous in San Josef Bay, west of Quatsino Sound, her captain, Lieut.-Commander Robson, immediately proceeded there and took on board the shipwrecked people.

Returning to Nootka, the Forward took the Florencia in tow for Victoria, but owing to an accident to her boiler, she had to cut the vessel adrift, with the unfortunate result that she piled up on a small island in front of what, until recently, was known as Wreck Bay (now Florencia, both bay and island).

After repairing her boiler at Nootka, the Forward returned around the north end of Vancouver Island to Esquimalt, arriving there two months later after she had been given up for lost, the Hecate and Plumer having unsuccessfully hunted for her on the West Coast.

SCORES OF FISHING VESSELS have been lost in the immediate vicinity of Amphitrite Point, the last on Jan. 20, this year, when the 71-foot fishpacker Kodiak, loaded with herring, sank about five miles off the point. Her four-man crew was saved. A lighthouse was established on the point in 1905.

In 1878, the British ship Dunbarton might have piled up in Barkley Sound had her captain not heeded the advice of a lighthouse-keeper and trusted his ship to an Indian chief. Mistaking the sound for Juan de Fuca Strait, the Dunbarton went sailing merrily along until the captain found himself amongst a group of small islands. Realizing his mistake and not daring to turn his ship, he dropped anchor just in time. Indians from a nearby village came out in their canoes and he asked them to take him, in one of the ship's boats, to Cape Beale lighthouse, to seek the lightkeeper's advice. They agreed, and their chief accompanied him.

The lightkeeper, Emmanuel Cox, told the captain that he might have to remain there for several weeks before a tug could come from Victoria and tow him to sea. Also, that if the weather broke in the meantime, he might find himself in difficulties and probably lose his ship.

Through Mr. Cox, who acted as interpretor, the chief offered to take the ship safely out to sea, but only on one condition, that the captain give him complete charge and undertake not to interfere with him in any way. The chief had good reason for making these extraordinary demands. Some years previous, when the captain of an American trading schooner had found himself in the same predicament, he asked the Indians to show him the safest passage out. About 20 Indians climbed on board, most of them merely for the novelty of riding in a big ship; others to do some trading. There were two fairways and the chief chose the one which he knew was free of rocks. The captain insisted on the other and the vessel piled up. The Indians were thrown overboard, without their canoes, and two were drowned. When the schooner commenced to break up, the crew took to the boats, headed for the open sea and were never seen again. The Indians looted the wreck.

At first the captain of the Dunbarton demurred, but after listening to the lightkeeper and realizing the precariousness of his position, he finally concurred. He returned to his ship and the following day the Cox family witnessed a sight unique in marine history: a full-rigged, three-masted ship sailing out of the island-studded sound, with all her canvas spread and an Indian chief at the helm.

The Indians took the Dunbarton far out to sea and returned home in their canoes. Proud of his accomplishment and suitably rewarded, the chief gave himself a new name, "Hyas Ship Tyee" meaning Big Ship Chief.

TWO YEARS LATER, the full-rigged ship Old Kensington, bound from Puget Sound to China with lumber, became becalmed off Cape Beale and drifted dangerously near the rocks. Cox's daughter, Pattie, who was now telegraph operator at Cape Beale, wired Victoria for a tug, but none would come unless given a guarantee of $500.

Time meant everything, and as there was no way of contacting the ship, Pattie, who had that much in her savings account, guaranteed the money herself. A tug arrived the following day and towed the vessel to sea. The captain collected his fee, and, unknown to Pattie, told the master of the Old Kensington who had guaranteed it.

Six months later, Pattie received from China, where the Old Kensington had in the meantime arrived safely, a personal letter of thanks from the captain, some handsome gifts and a framed photograph of the ship. Pattie, now Mrs. P. S. Haslam, with her sister Frances, Mrs. R. M. Morrison, now resides at the Aged Women's Home on McClure Street. As girls, the sisters went to school at Victoria, travelling back and forth in whatever means of transportation was then available. Sometimes a passing sealing schooner would give them passage, and on two occasions they made the journey by canoe with friendly Indians.

Cape Beale lighthouse is the oldest on the west coast of Vancouver Island. It was established in 1874. The light on Pachena Point was established in 1907.

On July 27, 1879, the sailing ship Bechardass Ambiadess was abandoned after striking a reef off Pachena Bay, about three miles west of Cape Beale. The survivors were taken care of at Cape Beale lighthouse until a warship came and took them to Esquimalt. The Cox sisters always remembered this wreck, not only on account of the sailors being unable to speak English, but who, while waiting for the warship, split the family a year's supply of firewood. Amongst he wreckage washed ashore were several casks of excellent wine, which they salvaged.

On Dec. 8, 1880, the barque Glen Fruin was wrecked on Danger Rock, which stands alone off the entrance to Barkley Sound, and was subsequently abandoned. Her master had made the same mistake as the Dunbarton. The crew took to the boats and landed on a small island, with only the clothes they stood in and no provisions, remaining there until a passing schooner found them two weeks later. Fortunately, they found some dried fish in an Indian smokehouse, and on the island were some goats which belonged to a priest. The Indians and the priest were away, so the sailors helped themselves.

THE FULL-RIGGED American ship Orpheus, northbound from San Francisco in ballast, on Nov. 5, 1875, made the same mistake and was wrecked on one of the islands which stud the entrance to Barkley Sound. Wrecked on the same islands in 1869 was the barque Maria J. Smith, the schooners Lillie in 1891 and Erickson in 1892; the steamers, Tuscan Prince in 1923 and Tatjana in 1924, both on Village Island. The Victoria-built, four-masted schooner Malahat, once a rum-runner and subsequently converted into a log-carrier (under diesel power), struck a submerged rock and now lies on the bottom in Uchucklesit Inlet. The sinking of minesweepers HMCS Armentieres (1925) and HMCS Thiepval (1930), both in Pipestem Inlet, will be discussed in a later story.

On Dec. 6, 1906, Captain J. Allison and the nine crew members of the barque Coloma, were saved from a watery grave off Cape Beale by the lighthouse tender Quadra, Captain Hackett, minutes before the vessel was dashed to pieces on the rocks.

The Coloma, an old wooden vessel of 850 tons, San Francisco-owned and outward bound from Puget Sound with lumber for Australia, ran into a southeast gale shortly after clearing Cape Flattery. Springing a leak, she quickly filled, and, with decks awash, partially dismasted and her lifeboats carried away, she drifted helplessly before the storm.

Fortunately, she was sighted, when dangerously near the rocks, by Thomas Paterson, the lightkeeper at Cape Beale, her flag flying upside-down (the international distress signal) from what was left of a mast. There was only one chance of saving those on board, and that rested with the Quadra, which Paterson knew at the time was sheltering at Bamfield, six miles away. But the telephone line to Bamfield, along with the one to Victoria, was out of commission. Trees uprooted by the same storm, it transpired afterwards, had cut both lines in a hundred places.

Paterson couldn't leave his foghorn by day, or the light by night, so his wife insisted on going. Donning heavy clothing, with a lantern in her hand, for it was now dark, and accompanied by her dog, she set out, her path leading part way along the rock-strewn shoreline and then through the bush. Exhausted, drenched through and her clothing torn, she finally reached the home of an old friend, Mrs. McKay, to whom she told her story. Mrs. McKay, who died recently at Bamfield, was another daughter (Annie) of Emmanuel Cox, the lightkeeper at Cape Beale in 1878.

James McKay, the husband, was away at the time, in fact endeavoring to repair the broken telephone line. But that didn't daunt his wife, who, not waiting even to offer Mrs. Paterson a cup of tea or a change of clothing, took the family rowboat and rowed out to the Quadra.

Mrs. Paterson told Captain Hackett of the distressed ship's plight and within a very short time the Quadra was proceeding at full speed in the direction of Cape Beale. The derelict vessel was sighted shortly after rounding the lighthouse, in the vicinity of Seabird Islands, off Pachena Bay.

The gale had somewhat subsided by this time, but heavy seas prevented Captain Hackett from approaching close. A ship's boat, manned by Second Officer McDonald and a picked crew, was lowered over the side and soon had a line on the Coloma, which was then almost on the rocks. One by one the entire crew was taken off.

Meanwhile, Minnie Paterson walked the trail back to the lighthouse and her family. A week later, when the telephone line was repaired, she heard that her mission had not been in vain. The mother of five children, Mrs. Paterson never fully recovered from the effects of her heroic mission. She died five years later.

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